

International Security Monthly Briefing – October 2005

IRAQ IN A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

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The month of September had been considered a relatively easy month for US forces in Iraq, in that only 49 American military personnel were killed. This was the lowest figure for six months and was one of the factors that gave rise to another phase of the oft-repeated claim that the insurgency was easing. In some ways, even this 'good news' was misleading, in that the military deaths in September were still higher than for any of the six months from May to October 2003 when the insurgency was getting into its stride.

In any case, the optimism was short-lived in that the following month, October, turned out to be one of the worst since the start of the war, with 96 troops killed. Apart from the two months of intensive fighting around Fallujah in April and November of last year, there was only one month since the war started, January of this year, when the death toll among American forces was higher. Overall, the period from August to October 2005 has been particularly difficult for the US forces in Iraq. It is not just the death toll, standing at 230 for the three months, but it is also the persistently high rate of injuries. In this period, 1,700 US personnel have been injured, with 600 of them sustaining serious injuries, most of these being evacuated to Landstuhl military hospital in Germany and then on to the United States for longer-term treatment. About half of all the troops sent back to the United States are eventually discharged from the armed forces, many of them disabled for life.

There had been an expectation that there would be a surge in the violence around the time of the referendum, but this had also been anticipated during earlier elections, and maintaining US troops and Iraqi security forces on high alert had actually reduced the incidence of attacks on previous occasions. While the referendum did yield a positive result for the new constitution, it came close to falling as two provinces rejected it. Since three were required to do so for it to fail to be approved, the constitution goes ahead, but it seems likely to do little to curb the insurgency.

Meanwhile, the casualties among Iraqi police and security forces continue at a high level. Iraq Body Count now reports up to 30,000 casualties since the war began. While the great majority have been civilians, the police and security forces continue to be severely affected. There have also been some highly sophisticated attacks, including one on the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad that is used widely by the foreign media. The hotel is across the river from the heavily protected 'green zone' that houses the Iraqi government, US Embassy and many other US facilities, but the Palestine Hotel is in a heavily protected compound. On 24 October, two bombs were used to breach the outer protected perimeter around the hotel complex, and a cement truck loaded with explosives was then rammed through the damaged perimeter and into the compound before exploding. Although the hotel was not destroyed, at least seventeen people were killed.

Countering the Insurgency

Two trends have recently emerged in the evolution of the insurgency. One is the increased use of large improvised explosive devices against road convoys including the more regular use of shaped charge explosives that are able to pierce armoured vehicles. Many of the recent American casualties have been caused by such IEDs and they are also being used against British forces in the south east of the country, so much so that the British Army is making far more use of its limited force of helicopters in order to move troops around and minimise road patrols.

One of the responses on the US side is to increase the number of major military operations in the towns and cities north west of Baghdad towards the Syrian border. This region has been presumed to be both a

centre of insurgency and a route for foreign paramilitaries coming in from Syria. There were several occasions in October when combined US/Iraqi forces of well over a thousand troops were deployed against particular centres of population. A feature of these attacks was the use of substantial firepower, including helicopter gun-ships and strike aircraft. This often involved the targeting of presumed insurgent strongholds with substantial bombing raids, leading to reports from US sources of many insurgents killed. All too often, however, these were followed by reports from local hospitals of large numbers of civilian casualties. Although it is difficult to be sure, it is probably the case that as the deaths and injuries among US troops stay at a high level, and as the US military forces appear unable to curb the insurgency, so there is a marked tendency to play to their strengths. The main one is the immense fire power advantage, but the two inevitable results of this, as seen in Fallujah a year ago, are firstly the civilian deaths and other collateral damage, and secondly the persistent reporting of these actions across the region, even though they may seldom reach into the western media.

Al-Qaida Evolving

The July 2005 briefing (*London, Sharm al Sheikh and the al-Qaida Movement*) in this series sought to analyse the significance of Iraq for al-Qaida. In a general sense it is certainly the case that the continuing western occupation of Iraq is very useful to the al-Qaida movement. Since one of the long-term aims of the movement is to establish a renewed Islamic caliphate, the fact that Baghdad was the main city of the Abbasid Caliphate for several hundred years is a powerful motivating force. The occupation of Iraq can readily be presented as a neo-Christian endeavour involving Israeli (Zionist) cooperation that is an affront to Islam and is, furthermore, also motivated by a determination to control Arab oil.

Moreover, the high civilian death toll in Iraq, and the widespread reporting by regional satellite news channels of the death and destruction wrought by high-tech US weapons systems both serve to increase anti-Americanism, not just in the region itself but also across the wider world. This may not all be directly relevant to al-Qaida, given that foreign paramilitaries still make up only a small minority of the insurgents in Iraq, but this is likely to grow with time, and it is certainly the case that Iraq is becoming significant as a combat training zone for young Islamic paramilitaries.

In the past four years, al-Qaida has lost a number of its key leaders, either killed or detained, and has also lost its main base in Afghanistan. As such it is limited to those parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan that are not under government or US control. Many analysts argue that this is not a major problem for the movement since it has undergone a metamorphosis into a much more dispersed entity. Having lost its more structured organisation of pre-9/11 days, al-Qaida is now more of an idea than a firm movement, and is therefore much more difficult to infiltrate, track and counter.

Such a form of analysis also points to the many different attacks that al-Qaida and its affiliates have carried out in the past four years, including Bali, London, Djakarta, Istanbul, Karachi, Casablanca, Madrid and many more. This list excludes a number of attacks that may have been countered by western agencies, including potential incidents in Rome, Paris and Singapore, a cluster of incidents that was augmented by George Bush in October to include planned attacks in Los Angeles, London's Heathrow Airport and the Straits of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf.

In listing these further operations, President Bush was seeking to show that al-Qaida is being curtailed and that the United States and its coalition partners are having successes in his global war on terror. It can also be interpreted in a rather different way. If this 'weakened' organisation is able to mount all the attacks listed above, while having other operations intercepted, it suggests a capability that is formidable, and is certainly much greater than its level of operations in an equivalent period before the 9/11 attacks.

There is, though, a further factor to consider. An objective assessment is that the al-Qaida movement remains active, and is capable of encouraging if not actually directly organising attacks across the world. Moreover, it can do this when it has only the loosest of structures and operates without a coherent base. While this could be represented as a successful transformation, not least because it makes counter-terrorism operations so difficult, it could also be said to be a disadvantage in that an even greater capability could result from a combination of this dispersed movement with a more coherent base that would demonstrate that the movement actually holds distinct territory. If this combination was to evolve, then the wider jihadist movement, with al-Qaida at its centre, could become very much more potent.

Al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Could such a combination evolve? There are two current possibilities – Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, the Taliban insurgency continues, currently tying down around 20,000 foreign troops, mostly American. This force operates in those eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan in which Taliban and other guerrilla groups are currently operating. It is distinct from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that engages in peacekeeping and peace-enforcing operations in Kabul and some other cities. At the present time, the guerrilla forces may have influence over some districts but cannot be said to control them in the manner in which the Taliban regime did in the 1990s.

Nor is it possible for al-Qaida militias to operate freely in North and South Waziristan and other districts across the Pakistan border. Osama bin Laden and other elements of the surviving leadership, together with paramilitary support, may be able to move around in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border zone, but that is different from having a degree of territorial control that enables them to maintain training camps and other facilities. This is what was in existence prior to the termination of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001. It is true that many of the jihadists who went to the training camps in Afghanistan during this earlier era were actually doing so in order to join the Taliban in their ongoing civil war with the Northern Alliance. This was a more significant role for the training camps than preparing paramilitaries for action in other parts of the world, although that may have been a subsidiary function.

At the present time, it is unlikely that Taliban or al-Qaida militia have adequate territorial control in Afghanistan to establish training camps, and they certainly do not have such capabilities in Pakistan. At the same time, relatively small groups of insurgents are tying down close to 20,000 western combat troops supported by helicopters, strike aircraft and a wide range of space-based and land/air-based reconnaissance facilities. Their very ability to do so means that such insurgents are continually getting combat training. For the US forces, with their problems of overstretch, Afghanistan is becoming a costly diversion while they have much larger forces committed in Iraq. Their predicament is that they cannot withdraw, nor can they hand over to less well-equipped forces from coalition partners, because of the risk that Taliban/al-Qaida paramilitaries could make territorial advances that could give them the potential to re-establish bases.

A New Base for Al-Qaida

If this is a potential problem in Afghanistan, then it is a far greater risk in Iraq, even if the number of foreign paramilitaries remains relatively small so far. The insurgency shows no signs of diminishing, but regional geopolitics, especially the security of Gulf oil supplies, means that there is no serious prospect of the United States withdrawing substantially from Iraq. As argued in an earlier briefing (*US Options in Iraq*, May 2005), one option for the United States forces would be what is sometimes called “Plan B”, a withdrawal from the cities and consolidation of US troops in a small number of large heavily protected bases, including some strategically located close to the major oil fields.

Such a redeployment would leave US forces far less vulnerable to insurgent attacks but would enable them to aid a client government in Baghdad when necessary. It was pointed out, though, that this would depend on the successful training and operation of Iraqi police and security force units, with them taking

over many security functions still being undertaken by US forces. So far this has had made little progress. Moreover, there would still be a major US presence in Iraq, serving as a continuing magnet for young paramilitaries drawn to Iraq from throughout the region and beyond.

Even so, a withdrawal from the cities and a much greater reliance on air power to limit insurgents and support a client government would have the domestic political advantage of decreasing American casualties. Given the current unpopularity of the Bush administration, there is a real concern in Republican Party circles that the mid-term congressional elections in a year's time could see major gains for the Democrats. If they were to achieve substantive majorities in the House and Senate, as is certainly possible, the last two years of the Bush administration could make for a seriously "lame duck" presidency, limiting the chances for a conservative victory in the 2008 Presidential Election.

For these reasons of domestic reality, some version of "Plan B" might well come to the fore in the next four to six months, but this may now have the added drawback of allowing the al-Qaida movement to gain a much stronger base within Iraq. This is by no means certain – the al-Qaida presence in Iraq makes up a small minority of the insurgency, even if its leadership is both innovative in its methods and particularly skilled at publicising its actions. In spite of this, there are persistent tensions between foreign jihadists linked to al-Qaida and what might best be described as neo-Ba'athist and Iraqi nationalist insurgents.

The real issue is one of timescales. If the US forces do progressively withdraw to major bases while supporting the Iraqi government and retaining large forces in the country, they are likely to be entrenched in such dispositions for some years to come. With continuing violence and the consequent civilian casualties, Iraq will remain a magnet for paramilitaries from many other countries, providing a combat training zone that may have an effect stretching over more than a decade, not least as an increasing proportion of the insurgents come from abroad.

This was already recognised as one of the consequences of the occupation of the country. What is new is the idea that the US predicament may go further than this if Iraq ends up having substantial districts that are simply not under any kind of central control. In these circumstances, not only will the country constitute a long-term training environment in urban guerrilla warfare, but it will also be available as a base for al-Qaida operations. As Afghanistan was in the 1990s, so Iraq may be in the coming decade – that is the extraordinary potential consequence of the decision to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime by force.

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The second volume of these briefings from May 2004 to April 2005 will be published shortly by I.B. Tauris in *Iraq and the War on Terror: Twelve Months of Insurgency, 2004-2005*.
